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ABSTRACT

An effective partnership among university students and professors, school district administrators, teachers, elementary school students, and parents from the school community is described. Relationships originally formed through a Title VII Transitional Bilingual Education grant were strengthened through the development of the Sam Houston State University Center for Professional Development. The Center differed from many other partnerships in that college students (preservice teachers) attended classes at the elementary school site. Twenty-four college students majoring in education took three courses in elementary education and were required to work with a cooperating teacher during the methods course semester. Students spent between 3 and 7 hours a week in their assigned classrooms. They observed the classroom teachers and university teachers as they delivered model lessons, and then began to teach classes themselves. Preservice teachers, classroom teachers, and college faculty saw themselves as members of the community. In addition, the diverse nature of the student body promoted the development of a multicultural attitude among the preservice teachers. As the field-based experiences developed, the educational community began to reach out to parents, providing Saturday classes in English as a second language and computer skills. Field-based experiences of this type, given the right components, can work in any community. A key factor in the success of this program was that all partners saw themselves as significant components of the learning community. (Contains 1 table and 16 references.) (SLD)

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Building a Community of Learners Through A Professional Development Model

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On a typical Tuesday afternoon, Roberto, a third grade student, goes to the cafeteria after his regular school day has ended. He enjoys a healthy snack and then goes to his tutoring session. As Roberto walks into the room, he is greeted by Patricia, an education major who comes to the sessions as part of her elementary methods classes. Patricia and Roberto begin their session with a review of notetaking strategies, followed by reinforcement of math, reading and study skills. Patricia will be beginning her curriculum unit teaching in Roberto's classroom in two weeks. She tells him that she is excited about coming to teach, and he shares a "nifty" science activity that some university students did with his class last year. Roberto continues to talk and says that his mother and he attend Saturday School as Sammons (SSS) and that she is learning English and computer skills. Patricia indicates that she will be at SSS next Saturday to help in the program. Today the university professor and Roberto's teacher stop by to offer encouragement during this session. Other days, they individually observe and offer feedback and engage in reflection with Patricia and Roberto.

The above scenario represents a way in which three partners, schools, universities, and parents, in a community support one another in the educational development of students at the elementary and university level. It further supports the notion that a community learning situation can be mutually beneficial. This type of system serves multiple partners in various avenues which is the ultimate goal of community education.[1] This article will provide professors, as well as other higher education and school district personnel with some examples of how an effective partnership was developed among university

professors and students, school district administrators, teachers, and students, and parents from the school community.

Relationships were initially formed between the university and school faculty and administration through the writing and implementation of a federal Title VII Transitional Bilingual Education Grant.[2] Another grant, funded through the Texas Education Agency, subsequently empowered the established partners through the development of the Sam Houston State University Center for Professional Development [SHCPD].[3]

Current evidence in the field of education supports the collaboration of schools and universities in the preparation of new teachers.[4] This collaboration is the basic commodity and fundamental principle that guides the concept of professional development centers. However, this is not always the philosophy of professors as indicated by Dey who reported the results of a survey by the Higher Education Research Institute at the University of California Los Angeles.[5] Dey reported that traditional teaching methodology, such as lecture and class discussion, are the main means by which faculty teach, and that only 20% of the faculty use experiential learning or field-based studies to teach.[6] These findings are contrary to the operational premise of the professional development center concept where professors spend much of their time assisting their students in bridging theory to effective practice through having the undergraduate students take classes, observe, research, and apply learning on the specified professional development center (PDC) school site. Not only do the faculty spend time with their personal university students at this site, but through becoming a part of the elementary or secondary school's learning community, the faculty members begin to serve the larger educational community.

The PDC concept gives new meaning to community learning where university and school district faculty members create on-site, real-world learning laboratories for the undergraduate students. Other university faculty members who visit or read about the PDC are able to ascertain whether they would be willing to alter their instructional methodology to fit the PDC model. Additionally, school district teachers and administrators are also able to determine if they would be able to make the time commitment in developing such a learning community.

Following are two examples of community learning facilitated through the PDC concept in which all participants are placed in a winning, learning situation. The first example is a description in which university preservice teachers become a part of a school community by having extended practica in real classroom settings. The second example reaches into the community through the involvement of professors and undergraduate students with parents in the educational process of their children. Parents also are provided opportunities for personal improvement. Additionally, this model supports graduates students who also assist in the program and allows them to gather data for academic and professional growth.

University Students on an Urban Elementary Campus

Twenty-four university undergraduate students (preservice teachers) who were in their senior year were offered field experiences in an urban elementary setting, Sammons Elementary, Aldine Independent School District, Houston, Texas, a culturally and linguistically diverse campus. This campus was designated as the university's Urban Professional Development Site (PDS) for the SHCPD. The following courses were taught on the campus: Methods of Teaching Elementary Science (3 credit hours), Methods of Teaching Elementary Social Studies

(3 credit hours), and Methods of Teaching Elementary Math (3 credit hours). No laboratory hours were included. However, the students were required to have 16 scheduled hours in and out of class for two days per week during the methods semester, prior to the student teaching semester.

Preservice teachers were placed for a full semester with a mentor teacher where they learned to instruct children through a particular subject or strategy which was essential to developing authentic learning environments. This concept is supported by the research of Robbins and Patterson who found that learning to teach in an authentic environment is a developmental process that is sometimes gradual, but always grounded in personal experience.[7] University professors supported this process through the sharing of research and theory as the two related to the practice of teaching. It was in this type of arrangement that theory and practice truly merged. Additionally they assisted in the process by providing training for mentor teachers and by facilitating reflection on curriculum, instruction, student interactions, and student learning.

The university students spent between three and seven hours per week in each of their assigned classrooms. They began by observing mentor teachers as they interacted with students. Gradually these future teachers prepared activities and subsequently delivered lessons to the children. Preservice teachers observed mentor teachers and university professors as they demonstrated model lessons. University professors, in turn, viewed lessons that were delivered by mentor teachers and preservice teachers and provided feedback. Reflections and self assessments were conducted on all teaching incidents and were facilitated through video recordings.

In preparing new teachers for the 21st century, the SHCPD believes that future teachers must be technologically proficient. Therefore, technology was integrated into math and science through the use of teaching tools that incorporate programs such as HyperStudio and Windows of Science, a laserdisc program by Optical Data. Additionally, all reports and student-developed activities were generated using computer technology and scanners. The computer lab and the Technology Specialist on the elementary campus were available to university students as they prepared lessons and activities for instruction.

The preservice teachers in this project saw themselves as a part of the learning community, since their university class met on the elementary campus and since they worked daily in the classrooms. Their plans for teaching and assisting in the classroom were developed directly from the curriculum scope and sequence as defined by their respective mentor teachers. The planning then became a combined effort among university students, mentor teachers, and university professors. Observations and initial work within the classroom gave the preservice teachers a foundation for the preparation of the curriculum by their knowing the developmental and functional levels of the elementary students. Their curriculum plans were written in teams of two or three for a six-day teaching episode in science, math, and social studies and were aligned with the state's essential elements and district curricula. Science and social studies curriculum was developed as an integrated unit, incorporating technology and alternative assessment methodology. Once planning was completed, university students were able to enter the classroom and deliver the lessons in a way they have never been able to before.

The dialogue during the planning process which occurred between the preservice teachers, their mentor teachers, and the professors strengthens the argument for field-based experiences for these future teachers. Within this framework, the undergraduates experienced the advantages and disadvantages of working with a team which is a real component of teaching. In their newfound roles, they expressed fear and anxiety of the unknown. By the end of the teaching episodes, they shared feelings of greater confidence and assurance that they could teach effectively. Following are some of their comments:

> "I never realized what went into curriculum planning and teaching until now. It's a tough job."
>
> "The most important thing we found in the planning and teaching process is that we learned to listen to each other and draw on each other's strengths. We also were able to see what worked and what didn't work in our plans and why.
>
> "We are going to make a conscious effort during student teaching next semester to work as a part of the school community. The understanding of the children, the culture of the school, and the teachers makes a difference in the way we view the curriculum and day-to-day operations of the classroom."

The Professional Development Site, Multicultural, and Bilingual Education

Because Sammons Elementary is an ethnically diverse campus, university students were guided in the process of the development of a multicultural attitude, which further enhanced their sense of community.[8] They were encouraged to think seriously and critically about the development of a multicultural environment. They began this with a critical essay about their own culture and further clarified their feelings and perceptions with a university professor. They increased their awareness of diversity by reading about and discussing other cultures. They were urged to remain open-minded and to absorb what is

similar and different in cultures. They were able to respect those differences and to understand that respect does not distinguish color. They began to comprehend that sensitivity and awareness of cultural patterns are essential in building the multicultural environment. As a part of this development, they recorded and observed a lesson where they interacted with the students. They judged themselves as to their respect, understanding, and response to cultural diversity found among ethnic groups, languages, genders, and exceptionalities (special needs students). They were developing, in essence, an attitude or an ethic of caring. Preservice teachers received the opportunity to work within their selected field of early childhood, bilingual, special education, or mainstream classes.

The ethic of caring is an important concept in a PDC; here, it was confirmed as the university faculty and preservice teachers provided an added force of instructors who cared about quality education for students. A greater degree of individualized instruction for elementary students was offered by having the university preservice teacher in the classroom setting. Additionally, professors demonstrated effective lessons with the elementary students for the preservice and mentor teachers. The preservice teachers were able to see their professors in action with students. The reality of theory to effective practice was more vivid to them in this demonstration. Many young students thrive on the attention and encouragement that the university students were offering as evidenced by the following comments from elementary students:

> "I like having you in my classroom because you help me learn better."
>
> "Your activities are so much fun, I really like the Emu eggs and the experiment we did."

"You always smile when you see me."

This PDC is designated as the bilingual education site with several of the university students enrolled in the field-based methods courses working toward a dual endorsement in bilingual and elementary education. They were able to offer the Sammons Elementary language diverse children support within their own culture and language. They were assigned to bilingual classrooms for the semester. The preservice teachers assisted in the bilingual classroom to help teach students to express the individuality of his/her own culture and language. Once field-based experiences were established in bilingual classes, it became evident that there was a need to reach the broader community. This was able to be done through the integration of the SHCPD and the Title VI grant funds, activities, and human resources.

Involvement of Parents in the Community of Learners

A need arose to provide potentially English proficient parents in the community with a program which would be more inclusive of them in the educational framework of their children and which would assist them in acquiring the target language, English. Over four semesters the experiences for parent support services were developed and refined. During this time those involved in the program were Sammons Elementary faculty/administrators, two university professors, campus bilingual preservice teachers, campus administrators, bilingual teachers, masters students, and doctoral students. Preservice teachers along with university professors planned and prepared sequential lessons for the SSS. Saturday enrichment activities were provided for the parents and their children of all ages at no cost to the family. SSS was federally funded partially by a bilingual education Title VII grant and was fully supported by the elementary school campus administration team. The

program proved its success with an average of 35 parents in attendance each Saturday. Initially the program ran for six hours on Saturday for eight weeks. But, with time constraints on the all partners, the program per Saturday was cut in half. All partners were committed to the SSS during the semester, ten consecutive weekends for three hours every Saturday morning. (The principal and assistant principals rotated the opening of the building each Saturday.) One-half of the parents attended an ESL class for 1.5 hours (beginning and advanced) and then moved to a hands-on computer class for the remaining time. The opposite occurred for the other half of the parents.

This joint program between two universities (Departments of Curriculum and Instruction, Educational Leadership and Counseling, and Language, Literacy, and Special Populations, Sam Houston State University, and Department of Curriculum and Instruction, Office of Bilingual/ESL Education, Texas A&M University- College Station) not only provided university students laboratory settings for working with potentially English proficient learners, but more importantly contributed to the community learning structure on this campus. Those in this community of learners who benefited from the Saturday program included, but were not limited to, professors, parents and elementary age students as well as undergraduate students, masters students, and doctoral students. The elementary students had semi-structured learning activities during the morning SSS session.

Parents were highly motivated to attend the SSS and had the expectations that the skills they were learning would improve their socio-economic status and their personal lives. The motivation of the parents was most evident in one male parent who attended each

Saturday who had worked all night and gotten off work at 6:00 a.m. and was at the SSS at 9:00 a.m. for classes.

Among the many basic English skills of reading, writing, speaking, and listening, and learning about how to better assist their children, they also learned how to write a resumé in Spanish and English and how to fill out a job application in English. These skills were incorporated in the ESL class and then applied during the computer session. Among the finished products were a professionally typed resumé and accompanying letters.

As a part of the evaluation of this program, interviews, using open-ended questionnaires, were conducted with the parents in attendance to determine what improvements could be made and what benefits these parents were receiving. The parents rated the program as extremely valuable. Comments made by the parents indicated that this program was significant in their lives and in the future of their families:

> "Today I clean buildings, but as long as I try to learn English, my next job will be better."
>
> "My husband and I want to start our own business. We are here to learn computer skills and improve our English. We want a better future for our children."
>
> "When my children see me doing my homework, they want to help. We learn as a family."

The Saturday program for parents appeared to be making a difference in the lives of their families. Parents were part of the learning community which emphasized individual improvement and the goal of life-long learning. Additionally, this program assisted the parents in communicating with their children about their school life. By involving and supporting parents, a child is likely to be more successful in school, thus, leading to greater success in the future. Parental encouragement

and assistance contribute to students' higher achievement, report card grades, better attitudes, and higher aspirations.[9]

A Winning Situation

Field-based experiences through PDC's, given the right components, can work in any community. The professors, teachers, and administrators at this PDC believe that teachers for the new century must be prepared to take advantage of opportunities which prepare them for authentic teaching. This can happen best if schools and university-based educators demonstrate collaboration and open communication. A key factor in this community was that all partners saw themselves as a significant component of a learning community, comprised of diverse groups and focused on providing the best education possible for all students. In this project, the universities and school were seen as one, not as separate entities, in the educational process.

Table 1 depicts results of a focus group evaluation session of two professors, an administrator, a masters student, a preservice teacher, and a doctoral student. The field-based methods courses and parent involvement program required collaborative actions on the part of all participants. The need was there, the participants were willing, and the benefits applied to all.

Insert Table 1 about here

The types of programs offered by the above actions all had a common theme of collaboration, expectations, commitment, and community. These experiences have implications beyond the school system; they demonstrated effective integration of service experiences into the learning process.

According to the focus group evaluation, empathy, expectations, compromise, reconciliation, and commitment were attributes that each participant needed to contribute to a successful learning community. Participants in the examples offered here brought out a set of values or wants that were relevant to the participants' respective microcultures where each person wanted something different out of this community of learners. Success of the program depended on the degree to which each participant was willing to compromise and reconcile values towards the attainment of the whole program.[10]

Commitment also was the activating force in the continued success of this program. University professors and school district personnel were committed to the education of good teachers and the education of children and their families. All parts together made a unified community that was supportive of the advancement of the learner. In this type environment, as a Mayan Quiché proverb states, " No one stays behind; all walk together."[11]

Endnotes

1. Kinsley, 1994.

2. ¡Queremos Triunfar!, 1995.

3. Craycraft, 1995.

4. Goodlad, 1991; Cochran-Smith, 1991; Holmes Group, 1990; McDermott, Gormely, Rothenberg, and Hammer, 1995; Meade, 1991; Renaissance Group, 1995.

5. Dey, 1995; Astin, Koen, and Dey, 1993.

6. Dey, 1995.

7. Robbins and Patterson, 1994.

8. Lara-Alecio & Rendon, 1995.

9. Epstein, 1992.

10. LeCompte, 1995.

11. Recinos, 1994.

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Table 1.
Critical Components of How the Professional Development Center Becomes a Community of Learners: A Focus Group Evaluation Discussion

1. **Planning** by the coordinators of the center appeared to be critical with the following groups in this order: (1) professors with professors, (2) professors with campus administrators, and (3) professors with teachers.

2. **Explaining** in detail, all projects of the program to the students, both undergraduates and graduates.

3. **Providing** the students on the campus, in classrooms, one third of their time (classes were scheduled on Tuesdays and Thursdays, 8:00 until 4:00; therefore, the time provided flexible scheduling for the professors involved).

4. **Allowing** the professors to be on the campus, in classrooms, and involved in other staff development and parent involvement one third of their time, collectively.

5. **Giving** one professor the title of liaison with the undergraduates, other professors, the administration, and the teachers.

6. **Dialoguing** consistently between the professors and the teachers, as well as between the preservice teachers and their mentor teachers.

7. **Coaching** (professors) the parents in the program and their undergraduate and graduate students while providing models for community service .

8. **Having** willing and committed participants.

9. **Supplying** feedback (from the mentor teachers and professors) to the pre-service teachers.

10. **Developing and Delivering** a sequenced and relevant curriculum for the parents.

11. **Empathizing With and Understanding** all involved in the project from the elementary students in the classroom, preservice teachers, mentor teachers, and professors. In a professional development center site, it is important for all partners to feel a part of the program. (All talked in terms of "our" program.)

12. **Viewing** the universities and school as one entity in the educational process.